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SUBJECT: FORMER PRESIDENT CARTER DISCUSSES RELIGIOUS FREEDOM DURING VISIT TO HABITAT FOR HUMANITY PROJECT IN SICHUAN QUAKE ZONE

REF: A) CHENGDU 090, B) CHENGDU 218

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**11.** (U) The message contains sensitive but unclassified information. Not for distribution on the internet.

**12.** (U) SUMMARY: Former President Jimmy Carter, former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, and officials from the Carter Center and Habitat for Humanity, traveled to Sichuan Province November 19 to meet volunteers at a Habitat home-building project in Qionglai City, 80 kilometers southwest of Chengdu. At a press conference there, Carter thanked Chinese officials for their cooperation with Habitat, and appealed for increased cooperation and religious freedom. The media, in widespread coverage, praised Carter's spirit of volunteerism as an example that Chinese leaders should follow. Post took advantage of visit to highlight the 30th anniversary of US-PRC diplomatic relations, including Carter's historical role.

**13.** (SBU) In a private conversation with Consul General, President Carter recalled how Deng Xiaoping had promised Carter expanded religious freedom, leading China to: adopt a related clause in its 1982 constitution; and allow the printing and availability of bibles in China. Carter, noting the Carter Center's work in monitoring village-level elections in China, expressed disappointment that current President Hu Jintao had done little to expand the freedom of the Chinese people. END SUMMARY.

Habitat for Humanity's Sichuan Project

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**14.** (U) Former President James Earl "Jimmy" Carter, Jr., Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, and representatives from the Carter Center and Habitat for Humanity International traveled to Sichuan Province to visit November 19 the site of a Habitat home-building project in the earthquake disaster zone. The visit was part of Habitat for Humanity's 2009 Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Work Project, which took place November 15-20 with projects in Chiang Mai, Thailand; Hanoi, Vietnam; Phnom Penh, Cambodia; Vientiane, Laos; and Qionglai City, Sichuan Province, China. Consulate supported the delegation with public affairs, logistical, security, medical, and motorcade support.

¶ 15. (U) Habitat for Humanity focused the project's China visit on Qionglai City (population 650,000, 80 kilometers southwest of Chengdu). Habitat is working with government authorities in Qionglai to build a series of multi-story homes, with the goal of providing safe, affordable and decent housing for poor families. Habitat plans to complete homes for 300 families during the first phase and hopes to work with the government to expand the project to a total of 1,200 families. During the week of November 15-20, more than 200 Chinese, American, and third-country volunteers worked in unseasonably cold weather to complete 20 homes as part of the first phase.

Carter Urges Expansion of Cooperation,

Notes Improved Religious Freedoms

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¶ 16. (U) At a press conference, Carter appealed for continued cooperation to allow Habitat to expand its work in China. He also took the opportunity to stress American values of equality, highlighting that on a Habitat project there was no distinction between rich or poor, inferior or superior. He concluded his press conference by alluding to the importance of religious freedom in China. When asked to comment on his observations of how China had changed since his first visit, he said, "I was in China in 1949. Everyone was dressed exactly the same. No one could move from one village to another. There was no freedom of worship. No bibles were permitted in China. Now, everything has changed. China is a great, growing nation, economically and politically. There is freedom of worship throughout China. Bibles are distributed freely, and you have one of the greatest

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economic systems in the world." (Note: Carter traveled to China as a young man just a few months before the establishment of the PRC. End Note.)

Carter Recalls Deal with Deng on Religious Freedom,

Expresses Disappointment with Hu Jintao

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¶ 17. (SBU) In a private conversation with Consul General in route to the work site, Carter recalled one meeting with Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, in which Deng thanked Carter for "being a great friend of China," and asked Carter if "China could do anything to repay him." Carter explained that he made three requests to Deng: 1) expanded religious freedom for the Chinese people; 2) the free printing and distribution of bibles in China; and 3) permission for missionaries to operate freely in China. The next day, Deng said that he: 1) would expand religious freedom for Chinese, 2) would allow the printing/distribution of bibles; but 3) could not allow missionaries to come to China. Carter then noted that Deng had later included a clause on religious freedom in China's new constitution of 1982, and that the world's largest printer of bibles was China, where bibles are widely available to the public.

¶ 18. (SBU) Carter also recalled how the (Atlanta-based) Carter Center had monitored four grass-roots elections in China, which are allowed at the village level. Carter explained that, under this electoral system, candidates who are not Communist Party

members are also allowed to run. Noting that he had met (current President) Hu Jintao "several times," Carter stated that he was disappointed that Hu had done little to expand the freedom of the Chinese people. (Note: Carter told CG that his conversation with Deng took place after he left the White House (in January 1981). From the context, the Carter-Deng conversations apparently took place in 1981 or in 1982, before the current Chinese constitution's adoption in December of 1982. Carter referred CG to the Carter Center's website for more information. [www.cartercenter.org/documents/531.html](http://www.cartercenter.org/documents/531.html) reports on a 1997 Carter Center effort to monitor village-level elections in Fujian and Hebei provinces, and notes that (in 1987) Deng had stated that "full democratization would take 50 years in China." End Note.)

#### Public Diplomacy Efforts Pay Off With Positive Media Coverage

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¶9. (U) During the weeks leading up to the Carter visit, Post intensified public diplomacy outreach efforts to increase community awareness of the visit and to promote local media coverage. As the visit coincided with the 30th anniversary of the normalization of relations between the United States and China, Consul General and other officers wove the announcement of Carter's visit and discussion of his role in the normalization of relations into approximately 12 anniversary lectures at universities in key cities throughout the consular district. Additionally, Consul General discussed the history of US-China relations, and the impending visits of President Obama and Former President Carter, during a series of press roundtables in Chengdu, Chongqing, Guiyang, and Kunming.

¶10. (U) The widespread media coverage of the FPOTUS visit was highly positive and focused on the Habitat project as well as the Carters' spirit of volunteerism. "Chengdu Daily" (circulation 300,000) gave a detailed report of the building project, stressing Carter's hope that the people of Sichuan Province would benefit from the volunteers' assistance. Similar stories were carried by Xinhua News, "China Daily," and Sichuan's financial dailies. In addition to television and newspaper coverage, several online sources carried vivid photos, news stories, and commentary. Eastday.com commented on the fact that President Carter spent time eating and working with ordinary volunteers, thus setting a good example for China's high-level leaders. Chat room discussions picked up on this

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thread. Several comments praised Carter's 26 years of volunteer work with Habitat for Humanity, and compared this type of behavior with the typical behavior of high-level Chinese leaders, commenting that the Chinese people have much to learn from Carters' example of service.

#### The Civil Society Context: Reduced Space for NGOs

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¶11. (U) Habitat began working in China in 2000, and previously worked in Yunnan, Guangxi and Guangdong provinces. Following the devastating May 2008 earthquake, the organization set up operations in Sichuan to assist in the housing reconstruction process, arriving along with an influx of an estimated 200 other domestic and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As discussed ref A, NGOs have operated widely in the quake zone since May 2008, often filling gaps in the official

response. However, after a period of notable freedom of action in the early post-disaster months, they have faced an increasingly "managed" operating environment, with relations with local officials usually the key determinant of whether they can continue their work or not. Larger organizations with savvy government relations and a willingness to stay away from sensitive issues - whether domestic or international -- have been typically able to expand their post-quake work, while some smaller NGOs that want to maintain more autonomy have found themselves increasingly squeezed out.

BROWN